



‘Maturing Out’ as dilemmatic: Transitions towards relatively light drinking practices among UK University students

Dominic Conroy*¹ , Charlotte Morton² and Christine Griffin²

¹University of East London, UK

²University of Bath, UK

Objectives. University students in the UK engage in relatively high alcohol consumption levels, yet young adults, including students, now drink less than previously and abstain more. Against this cultural backdrop, our objective was to further understanding of ‘maturing out’ of excessive drinking practices among students by focusing on drinking transitions that had taken place during university years.

Design. A qualitative interview study.

Methods. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten 18- to 27-year-old UK undergraduate university students who self-identified as light or non-drinkers. Interviews were audio-recorded, and anonymized interview transcripts were subjected to an experience-focused application of thematic analysis.

Results. Participants reported dilemmas involved in transitions from relatively high to low levels of alcohol consumption. One dilemma was characterized by managing to drink less (or nothing) without cutting off social options with university friends/peers. A second dilemma concerned not wishing to fully abandon the pleasures and increased social confidence that alcohol consumption could afford. Results also demonstrated that self-reported drinking could contradict participants’ self-defined ‘light drinker’ status.

Conclusions. This study reinforces the view that ‘maturing out’ involves more than simply having gained new responsibilities during young adulthood. Recognition of these dilemmatic features of drinking transitions could be drawn on in novel campus-based interventions. Such interventions may help strengthen realistic and sustainable moderate drinking by guiding students to anticipate potential difficulties involved in planned reductions in personal drinking but may also help foster students’ ability to view drinking choices as in transition rather than as permanent and enduring.

Statement of contribution

What is already known on this subject?

- UK university undergraduates drink alcohol excessively relative to general population peers.
- International drinking declines indicate increased non-/lighter drinking among 16- to 24-year-olds.
- Evidence has highlighted how ‘maturing out’ of excessive drinking occurs during early adulthood

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

*Correspondence should be addressed to Dominic Conroy, Department of Psychological Sciences, School of Psychology, University of East London, Arthur Edwards Building, Stratford Campus, Water Lane, London, E15 4LZ, UK. (email: d.conroy@uel.ac.uk).

What does this study add?

- Maturing out of excessive drinking may trigger dilemmas around socializing and drinking choices.
- Recognizing alcohol's residual appeal may help 'transitioned drinkers' maintain moderate drinking.
- Highlights how self-reported drinking may contradict self-defined status (e.g., as 'light- drinker').

Background

University students are a demographic group of 'young adults' (i.e., individuals aged around 18–30 years) for whom it is typically normatively acceptable to consume high levels of alcohol (Davoren, Demant, Shiely, & Perry, 2016; Heather et al., 2011). Evidence continues to bear out harmful drinking practices among university studies. For example, in a systematic review of 29 UK studies published between 2002 and 2014, nearly two-thirds of students reported hazardous alcohol consumption while 20% exceeded moderate weekly limits (Davoren et al., 2016). Student drinking in the UK occurs within a pervasive cultural norm of 'drinking to get drunk' (Griffin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, Mistral, & Szmigin, 2009; Measham & Brain, 2005) and within 'intoxogenic environments' like university campuses where excessive alcohol consumption is viewed as relatively typical and acceptable. Socializing in intoxicogenic environments without drinking (or drinking very little) is no small accomplishment because within these environments (e.g., university campuses), low or moderate alcohol consumption is easier to rhetorically denounce, while excessive levels of alcohol use, including alcohol use to deliberately become drunk/intoxicated, is easier to rhetorically validate (e.g., McCreanor, Barnes, Kaiwai, Borell, & Gregory, 2008). Importantly, these considerations have 'real-world' health, social, and economic implications: for example, a greater incidence of heavy episodic drinking (HED, i.e., consuming ≥ 60 g of pure alcohol once or more in the previous 30 days, World Health Organization, 2018) has been associated with wide-ranging negative personal outcomes (e.g., personal injury, psychological harm) and negative community outcomes including criminal damage and domestic violence (e.g., Anda et al., 2002; Gell, Ally, Buykx, Meier, & Hope, 2015).

International drinking declines

Trends reflecting overall declines in alcohol consumption among young adults present difficulties for understanding tendencies in adhering to or desisting from 'typical drinking practices' among university students, most of whom would be classified as young adults aged 18–30 years. Official figures for the UK suggest that the amount of heavy drinking reported by 16- to 24-year-olds in the UK is in decline, decreasing at a faster rate than any other age group (Office for National Statistics, 2017; Wybron, 2016). An increasing proportion of young people self-report that they abstain or drink lightly with increases from 18% in 2005 to 29% in 2015 (Fat, Shelton, & Cable, 2018). These patterns appear to reflect an international phenomenon of decreased drinking among young people (e.g., Pennay, Livingston, & MacLean, 2015; Raninen, Leifman, & Ramstedt, 2013). Delayed initiation of alcohol use partly explains increased non-drinking among young people and may also point to increases over time in the number of non-drinkers within specific population subgroups (e.g., Caluzzi & Pennay, 2019; de Looze et al., 2015; Fat et al., 2018). But drinking declines may also reflect polarization, with a sizeable minority of non-drinkers and occasional drinkers resisting the norms of 'extreme' drinking and 'determined drunkenness' (Martinic & Measham, 2008). Drinking declines may also be viewed as evidence that young people who abstain or drink less are opting out of cultures

of excessive drinking and possess increasing awareness of alcohol-related harms (e.g., Banister, Conroy, & Piacentini, 2019; Caluzzi & Pennay, 2019).

Research concerning the experiences of individuals who drink little/no alcohol has grown in the last decade. University students who drink no/little alcohol routinely face social challenges including negative peer responses and stigma associated with being viewed as anti-social (Conroy & de Visser, 2013; Herman-Kinney & Kinney, 2013; Jacobs, Conroy, & Parke, 2018). However, non-drinking or lighter alcohol consumption patterns have also been demonstrated to present individuals with positive material and subjective outcomes which may off-set the social downsides associated with lighter drinking (Caluzzi, MacLean, & Pennay, 2020; Conroy & de Visser, 2018). These studies are valuable beyond simply considering characteristics and experiences of non-drinkers and light drinkers because they provide insights into how moderate alcohol consumption might be promoted/encouraged among the wider student population. Studies of light and non-drinking among young adults have also acquired a new prescience given the context of international drinking declines described above.

‘Maturing out’ and drinking transitions

A substantial body of quantitative evidence has accumulated on ‘maturing out’, which refers to the phenomenon of widespread reductions in excessive drinking that takes place during the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Lee & Sher, 2018; Lemoine, Gmel, Foster, Marmet, & Studer, 2020; Windle, 2020). For example, a recent study of intraindividual variation in maturing out among U.S. individuals between the ages of 17 and 33 years has shown how moderate and higher levels of alcohol consumption during late adolescence were associated with worse health (e.g., sleep problems) and reduced social functioning including higher levels of partner conflict and greater likelihood of impeded working lives (Windle, 2020). These findings are important as they highlight how drinking patterns at early adult/adolescent life stages may hold implications for the trajectory of maturing out and its association with alcohol-related harms in later young adulthood. Greater consideration of the mechanics involved in driving maturing out as a phenomenon has been explored in recent qualitative research involving interviews with twenty-four Danish 24- to 27-year-olds (Järvinen & Bom, 2018). Evidence here offers an alternative understanding of why and how maturing out takes place, suggesting how excessive alcohol consumption levels may become increasingly difficult to defend in later young adulthood (e.g., late 20s) and would increasingly risk being viewed as deviant among peers. The most recent evidence concerning maturing out discussed above highlights differing trajectories of drinking transitions and suggests that complex, multifaceted dynamics may be involved in how maturing out is initiated in social context.

However, while studies have helped address questions about when maturing out typically occurs, questions remain around the qualitative experience of transition to more moderate consumption patterns, partly in terms of what factors impede/facilitate transitions to reduced consumption patterns. Traditional alcohol research approaches can disregard or de-emphasize the enjoyment and social pragmatics that alcohol consumption affords, despite evidence of alcohol’s role among younger adults in facilitating social bonding (de Visser, Wheeler, Abraham, & Smith, 2013; Hebden, Lyons, Goodwin, & McCreanor, 2015) and the potential escapist pleasures afforded by drinking alcohol (Parker, 2003). There is scope for greater understanding around whether/how alcohol is enjoyed or valued among individuals who have undergone recent transitions to relatively moderate drinking styles and for whom alcohol use (and excessive alcohol use)

and its positive subjective associations may hold strong residual attractions. Transitioned drinkers represent a sizable minority of UK university students: 12% of recent non-drinking university students recently reported no longer drinking alcohol despite having regularly consumed previously (National Union of Students, 2018). The picture is therefore multi-faceted: University students who have undergone drinking transitions may face pressure to drink and stigma linked to non-/light drinking, yet may simultaneously hold residual and compelling motivations *to drink* alcohol, potentially to excess (e.g., to extend an enjoyable social occasion). Students who have undergone drinking transitions experiences may also be buffered by broader contextual changes. Specifically, drinking declines among younger adults discussed above may serve to potentially empower transitioned drinkers who may recognize that light/non-drinking among young adults is an increasingly prominent and acceptable position to adopt in terms of decision-making around personal alcohol consumption.

Few studies have focused on lighter or 'reformed' drinkers who have transitioned from relatively high to relatively low alcohol consumption levels. From a theoretical viewpoint, such work could help develop the conceptual breadth and nuance of 'maturing out' to help produce a framework for understanding experiences of drinking transitions among young adults during their time as university students. University students are a focal group for understanding drinking transitions given that lighter/reduced drinking would be difficult in the context of relatively permissive campus-based norms concerning excessive alcohol consumption and given the widely recognized, multiple harms posed by excessive drinking within the student community. Furthermore, from a pragmatic viewpoint, understanding drinking transition experiences can guide understanding of what helps, and hinders, commitments to reduce alcohol intake and could therefore inform campus-based interventions to promote more moderate alcohol consumption. Accordingly, the present study aimed (1) to consider 'maturing out' in terms of experiences of drinking transitions from relatively high to relatively low typical alcohol consumption and (2) to understand factors that may make drinking transitions easier or more difficult.

Method

Participants

Sample characteristics are contained in Table 1. Participants were undergraduate students studying in South-West England. Study eligibility required individuals to self-report that they were currently non-/light drinkers who had undergone a transition in their drinking preferences and practices. We defined 'transition' flexibly to include self-reported reduced consumption/ HED engagement but could also refer to a changed relationship with drink-related choices and did not need to have occurred over a strictly defined period. Participants were sampled purposively by Author 2 and were recruited via a Facebook advert and on Fresher's fair webpages. The first sixteen individuals to respond were screened for eligibility. Three individuals did not respond to subsequent emails, and two individuals were excluded because they abstained for 'culturally sanctioned' reasons (e.g., religious/cultural reasons). Interviews were conducted with eleven individuals, ten of whom talked about dilemmas involved in drinking transitions in their interviews. As expected, our final sample of ten participants was mixed in terms of current drinking practices and included approximately defined 'light drinkers' ($n = 3$, e.g., Jack) and non-

Table 1. Sample details ranked by recent alcohol consumption frequency/intensity in descending order

Name	Sex	Age (uni. study year)	No. times alcohol consumed in typical month	Alcoholic drinks typically consumed per occasion (approximate UK alcohol units ^a)	Weeks since last drunk	Drinking transition details	
						Main motivations	Time frame involved in reduced drinking
Shaun	Male	27 (4)	8	2 × pints of beer (5)	16	Desire for new and more authentic social experiences	?Over last 5 years
Kelly	Female	20 (3)	4	5 × single spirits (5)	4	Wanted clearer connections with friends	?Over last 2 years
Lauren	Female	21 (4)	4	2 × pints of beer (5)	4	To avoid drink-related injuries, hangovers, excessive eating	Over last 1 year
Ellie	Female	18 (1)	4	4 × single spirits (4)	1	Disliked emotional volatility (e.g. anger) of drunk people	Over last 2 years
Michael	Male	21 (1)	2	3 × pints of cider (7.5)	4	Drink exacerbated depression, wanting to keep fit	?Over last 1.5 years
Jack	Male	18 (1)	2	2 × pints of beer (5)	n/a ^b	Father alcoholic and not wanting to drink as a result	n/a ^c
Alice	Female	18 (1)	2	1 × glass of wine (3)	?n/a	Wanted close communication with friends, wanting to have clear memories	n/a ^c
Hannah	Female	18 (1)	2	1 × pint of cider (2.5)	n/a ^b	Dislikes alcohol's taste	n/a ^c
Tyler	Male	18 (1)	0	n/a	n/a ^b	Does not feel need for alcohol	n/a ^c
Sophie	Female	22 (4)	0	n/a	n/a ^b	Wasting money, dislikes alcohol taste	n/a ^c

^a 1 UK alcohol unit = 10 ml or 8 g of pure alcohol.

^b Participant reports they have never been drunk.

^c Behavioural changes in alcohol consumption over time not clearly apparent from data, but interview suggested increased comfort with light drinking or non-drinking choice relative to previous life era.

drinkers ($n = 3$, e.g., Hannah), but also individuals who might be more accurately defined as 'moderate drinkers' ($n = 4$) some of whom engaged in routine HED (e.g., Kelly, Ellie).

Procedure

Study approval was obtained from University of Bath Psychology Ethics Committee. Individuals took part in face-to-face semi-structured interviews with Author 2 in private university campus rooms. The interview schedule contained open-ended questions which gave scope to modify the interview to focus on issues of interest to each participant. Piloting with two self-identified light-drinking students (not included in the final sample) led to minor adjustments to schedule content and sequencing. Interviews lasted 20–36 min ($M = 27.9$ min, $SD = 5.3$). Interview audio recordings were transcribed verbatim with participant names anonymized. The interviewer (Author 2) was a university student who drank alcohol in moderation and had recently reduced her alcohol consumption. This strengthened our study approach by combining an 'insider lens' at the point of data collection (Greene, 2014), kept grounded by Authors 1 and 3's distance from the data at the point of data analysis. Turning here to positionality, we acknowledge that Author 2's status as a fourth-year university student and potential perceived or actual seniority from a participant perspective may have acted as a source of bias within the data collection process. However, we note here that, significantly, Author 2 had no prior connection to any participant and was, ultimately, presenting herself to participants as a fellow student conducting work relating to undergraduate studies rather than as a relative 'outsider' (e.g., a departmental researcher or clinical psychologist).

Analytic approach

Data were subjected by Author 1 to thematic analysis with a 'Big Q' orientation (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, & Braun, 2017). A Big Q qualitative approach to data analysis involves an interpretivist orientation to data: the researcher/analyst has a key role in interpreting the underlying meanings apparent from textual accounts of phenomena. By contrast, a qualitative researcher adopting a 'small q' approach works within a positivist paradigm where a relatively straightforward relationship between what individuals say, and what they believe or do, is assumed (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Transcripts were read and re-read to develop an understanding of meanings and patterns, leading to conceptual codes which formed the basis of experiential themes. Themes were refined iteratively until a coherent, well-evidenced narrative account had been produced. The current article selectively reports themes concerning dilemmatic features of drinking transitions. Authors 2 and 3 used Braun and Clarke's (2006) 15-point checklist to verify the analytic process against established quality benchmarks. This involved auditing links between transcripts, notes, codes, and final thematic structure and cross-referencing data extracts against analytic claims. Our impression that further data collection would be unlikely to yield additional/contradictory codes was bolstered by the fact that the overwhelming majority of interviews (10 of 11, 91%) contained material concerning dilemmatic aspects of drinking transitions.

Results

Our analysis focused on the dilemmas involved in drinking transitions. The first dilemma involved wanting to drink little/no alcohol but recognizing how this might close off social options. The second dilemma concerned wanting to drink little/no alcohol while knowingly forsaking pleasures and social confidence attributable to alcohol consumption. Participant pseudonyms and age details appear in brackets after each extract.

Dilemma 1: Wanting to drink little/nothing versus keeping social options open

Material in this section concerned the experiences of individuals who, typically, wanted to drink lightly while socializing but without facing exclusion or negative peer responses. While drinking in moderation, rather than complete abstinence, was the preference of most participants, alcohol was recognized as an important social lubricant, and as a route into being (or feeling) more included in student social life. Resolving this dilemma was important yet difficult to achieve as it involved dealing with the potential stigma associated with non-drinking and sometimes being viewed as uninterested in socializing. Jack and Michael's extracts below illustrate these challenges:

(My non-drinking housemate) went to the alternative non-drinking nights during Freshers' week, and I feel maybe he excluded himself more because he didn't try to involve himself. It meant that he didn't bond in the same way with our flatmates who do drink. I went to drinking events because I didn't want to be restricted and feel like I had to do something different because I wouldn't be drinking. And I liked that safety blanket of knowing that I could go and do other things if I didn't like it. (Jack, 18)

I got involved with pre-drinking a bit during Freshers' week. . . I still wanted to make sure that I was getting involved during that first week to build those social connections. . . I think it would have been more difficult to make friends if I was avoiding drinking completely. (Michael, 21)

Jack, as a light drinker, recognized the dilemma he faced by balancing drinking preferences with social opportunities. He wished to avoid the social pitfalls of becoming excluded by housemates and peers, as experienced by his non-drinking housemate. Responsibility here lays squarely with the lighter drinker to make a conscious effort to attend occasions involving alcohol consumption regardless of personal consumption plans. A balanced mindset and sense of perspective were important for Jack, and there was comfort ('safety blanket') in recognizing that occasional night out drinking with flatmates was only one component of broader social options available to him. Laying down the fragile foundations of social networks was at the heart of dilemmas for both Jack and Michael. Recognizing connections between activities during initial university socializing and the years ahead of university life was key for Michael who saw a light-drinking mindset as threatening valuable opportunities to make friends and to retain social opportunities. Kelly and Hannah's accounts also concerned dilemmas underpinning social decisions:

It's important to sit with them for the first 2-3 nights, maybe even try going out for the first night, you don't have to drink. . . after that, just find people who have similar interests to you, if you don't like drinking then go to alternative events, go to comedy nights, join societies, do things where you'll find other people who are the same, who aren't gonna make you feel wrong or weird. . . there are so many opportunities to meet people who aren't like that. (Kelly, 20)

Participant: (My housemates who drink) just tend to go out without asking me now, so I think they probably just think oh, she's not gonna come out and drink.

Interviewer: Okay, so would you want them to ask you?

Participant: No, no I don't think so. . . I do want to be friends with them, but I don't like the things that they like, which makes it quite difficult. And I wouldn't really feel comfortable going out with them, so it's probably easier that they don't ask me. (Hannah, 18)

Kelly had recognized that spending time early on with peers who drank large amounts of alcohol was symbolically important as it demonstrated shared commitments (to socialize) with her peers. Like Michael, diverse social opportunities and activities afforded by university life were acknowledged yet Kelly also alluded to social costs of drinking preferences ('make you feel weird') and striking this balance while enduring scrutiny or mockery could be uncomfortable. While Hannah felt resigned to different social activities to her housemates, discomfort was also apparent ('quite difficult'). So, striking a balance was possible but difficult and carried potential social and subjective penalties for participants.

Many participants savoured the new-found independence of university life, and exerting alcohol-related preferences (i.e., to drink little/nothing) was a powerful illustration of this independence. However, most participants also recognized that their lighter drinking preferences could jar with their social aspirations. Discussing Freshers' week, Alice and Ellie explained:

At Freshers' week, I was like "new me, clean slate, I don't wanna drink so I won't drink" I found that on the first few nights I was so desperate not to cut any ties, to keep as many doors open that if there was an opportunity to, like not impress people but be the same as people. And luckily there was no situation where I was so desperate that I had to leave the situation, but I did find that downing a dirty pint happened a few times. . . and there were a few shots here and there. . . when I drank it was always because of pressure, or because a pal was like "do it do it". (Alice, 18)

I ended up really enjoying (Fresher's week). I never got ridiculously drunk, but it was quite nice being at like that tipsy stage, 'cause it's easier to make friends and talk to people. So I think that helps, and especially when everyone else is drunk, it helps you to fit in more and then you have the funny memories that you can all talk about when you were all really drunk. (Ellie, 18)

For Alice, drinking choices met with varied obstacles including peer pressure but fear of social ostracism was another powerful force making abstinence difficult and sometimes meant imbibing strong alcoholic drinks ('dirty pint') to show social comradery and spontaneity. Again, dilemmatic thinking underpinned this material; the clean slate around drinking preferences so attractive to Alice when starting university life was checked partly by the high value held by alcohol in the currency of social opportunities. Ellie's account corroborates Alice's: 'that tipsy stage' made things easier subjectively but worked also at a socially symbolic level both during the drinking occasion ('fit in more') but also subsequently ('funny memories').

Dilemma 2: Wanting to drink little/nothing versus temptation by alcohol's subjective effects

Despite, typically, being lighter drinkers, the subjective appeal of drinking alcohol and getting drunk lingered for many. This lingering appeal could again be personally

dilemmatic, with a tension between sticking to (non-/light-) drinking preferences and the desire to draw on alcohol's pleasurable disinhibitory psychoactive effects. Drinking less frequently (and, specifically, being drunk less often) involved, for some participants, a sense of loss. We hear first from Alice and Shaun:

So many people say to me 'none of my best memories start with a glass of water', and it's kind of true. Sometimes I think I would enjoy myself more if I was pissed and less inhibited. . . as a sober person, I'm so much more guarded. . . you're much more in control, maybe in a negative way because you're just constantly thinking. I can see exactly why people drink, they wanna let loose, let their hair down. (Alice, 18)

I guess a bit of reflection as well, like thinking about what I really want out of a night out. I mean there's something to be said about having a night out and getting wasted, like I'm sure that's useful in a way, sometimes you just need that to break up the pattern of what's going on (Shaun, 27)

Both light-drinking participants spoke to alcohol's value as a welcome break from life's demands. Again, a key feature of drinking less was getting/being drunk less frequently rather than drinking less *per se*. For Alice, being a non-/light drinker was dilemmatic in that the pleasurable 'letting go' opportunities of being 'pissed' (i.e., drunk) had been forsaken, despite advantages associated with avoiding high levels of intoxication. Dilemmatic thinking here could give way to high consumption levels, and the reasons for this went beyond peer pressure and cultural expectations or environmental affordances. For Shaun, a heavy night's drinking presented an opportunity to shake up his routine and to thereby acquire a new perspective on life. Sean's 'bit of reflection' reinforces the impression that dilemmatic thinking characterized drinking during these occasions. Striking here is that the pleasures and value identified in drinking large amounts of alcohol (and therefore getting drunk) are spoken to by two self-identified light drinkers. Alcohol also held a residual attraction for Lauren and Kelly:

Before I tried to just have a few drinks but it was a slippery slope. Like I'd be like ah fuck it, I'll have a few drinks tonight. . . do pre-drinking then get to the club and be like okay, good level still, but then you just get a bit over-excited and it all just happens again. . . I'll be like oh, just have a couple. And it might be alright, I might just have those few, or it might escalate. (Lauren, 21)

I can't say to you that I'm not a drinker because I definitely am, but I'm more moderate in it. . . I'll participate in the drinking games. . . I'll take a third of a bottle of vodka or something in a water bottle that I've pre-measured, and that'll be all I'll drink. I won't take a whole bottle 'cause then you'll end up drinking it, d'you know what I mean?' (Kelly, 20)

Here, alcohol's disinhibitory effects were valued, but deceptive qualities were also identifiable in Lauren's 'slippery slope' metaphor and initial moderate drinking plans unravel as the excitement of the social occasion unfolds. Lauren faced multi-pronged dilemmatic options: avoiding alcohol altogether *or* drinking to enjoy alcohol's positive subjective effects; and a further dilemma between attempting to drink limited quantities ('a good level') *or* submitting to the full, unpredictable experience associated with higher consumption levels. So, alcohol's effects were desirable but her relationship with alcohol over a social occasion's trajectory was also recognized as volatile and therefore untrustworthy. Kelly described careful calibration involved in how much alcohol she now brings to a social event. Scope for self-deception was hinted at here with Kelly's

experience alerting her to the risks of bringing larger volumes ('end up drinking it'). The task to navigate binary drink-related decisions during a social occasion (i.e., 'no alcohol' vs 'a large amount of alcohol') made 'light drinking' intrinsically challenging. Participants wished to assert drinking preferences but also wanted to harness positive aspects of imbibing alcoholic drinks in moderation. Being able to drink alcohol in moderation felt particularly challenging in some accounts, illustrated below:

(At pre-drinks) the problem was, it felt as though it was either drinking a lot to get drunk or not drinking at all, there wasn't really a middle ground. . . people in our flat either just didn't get drunk and they were acting completely normally, or they would just really go for it and get completely drunk. So we had one night where one of my flatmates was barking like a dog at people outside our flat (laughs) so no-one in the flat just had enough to be like a bit tipsy or a bit drunk, they went for it. (Jack, 18)

Any middle ground felt unavailable here. Alcohol was either consumed in excess or not at all, and the accompanying peer behaviour mirrored this binary, either bland normality or exaggerated caricatures, prevailed. This dilemma involved choosing between drinking a limited volume to enjoy identified pleasurable effects ('a bit tipsy') but underscored how surrounding heavier drinking practices placed considerable pressures on attending social occasions as a lighter drinker, and as someone striving to enjoy alcohol's subjective effects without succumbing to higher levels of intake.

Discussion

A prevailing normative culture of HED among university students is now complicated by a growing contingent of students who drink little or no alcohol. This makes it less straightforward to pigeonhole student drinking in homogenous terms and underscores the importance of understanding the experiences of students who drink little or nothing, and who reduce alcohol consumption during their time at university following, in some cases, initial periods of potentially excessive consumption. In this article, we sought to draw attention to dilemmas involved in transitions from relatively high to low levels of alcohol consumption among students. Dilemmas were characterized by managing to drink less (or nothing) without cutting social options and without fully abandoning the subjective pleasures and increased sense of social confidence that alcohol could afford.

Importantly, dilemmas held real-world consequences: Drinking alcohol was typically socially pragmatic choice (i.e., to 'fit in') while drinking little/nothing could mean eschewing opportunities to build and develop social connections. Such evidence of fearing ostracism (e.g., Jack's reference to a non-drinking housemate who 'excluded himself') or tactical social decision-making (e.g., Michael and Kelly's participation in pre-drinking to connect socially) was significant to observe as these indicated that the norm of drinking heavily retained its force even for individuals who drank little or nothing. This dilemma links with a growing literature on the social negotiations and identity-related challenges involved in refusing alcoholic drinks and managing favourable self-presentation as a non-/lighter drinker (e.g., Conroy & de Visser, 2014; Herring, Bayley, & Hurcombe, 2014; Nicholls, 2020; Piacentini & Banister, 2009). Current study data provided further evidence that lighter drinkers are under pressure to handle drinking preferences in sophisticated ways; for example, rejecting coarsely defined, stigmatized labels like 'non-drinker' as all-encompassing definitions of personal drinking preferences (see Banister et al., 2019), particularly during initial university periods when social bonds

are fragile and tentative. Our data help explain recent evidence that choosing to not drink while socializing risks being viewed as lacking spontaneous spirit and there limits opportunities to bond socially (e.g., 'when you're sober... you can end up lagging behind', Conroy & de Visser, 2018, p. 6). Despite self-identifying as current light-/non-drinkers, drinking, and getting drunk were identified as pleasurable and valued among many participants and the loss of routinely experiencing alcohol's subjective affordances at higher levels of consumption (e.g., feeling more relaxed, greater social confidence) reflected a second dilemma faced by individuals. However, though valued for social bonding, alcohol's disinhibitory effects were cautiously viewed as a 'slippery slope' to impromptu higher consumption levels. Accounts revealed personal dilemmas involved in transitioned drinking practices (e.g., whether to drink at all/to drink more or not) but the fragmented and contradictory nature of participant accounts also reflected *ideological dilemmas* (Billig et al., 1988) with contradictory beliefs/values presented in meaning-making accounts of drinking practices. For example, alcohol was, on the one hand, central for initiating or cementing friendships, yet sobriety was also discussed as important in the process of developing intimate friendships (e.g., Shaun's 'when I'm sober, experiences are less artificial cos I'm actually bonding with people'). Agency was required to assert drinking preferences but also to pursue/secure personally fulfilling types of friendship, chiming with discussion of the potentially enabling dynamics involved in articulating ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988, p. 11-15).

Our findings help to extend understanding of the scope of 'maturing out' as a phenomenon. Like Järvinen and Bom's (2019) research, participant talk pointed to complex contextual factors involved in transitions in drinking practices and suggested that 'maturing out' involved more than merely the adoption of new life responsibilities (e.g., taking on a first major job) which would act as traditional markers reaching 'full adulthood'. However, rather than the strong normative currents steering young adults towards lighter drinking styles shown in Järvinen and Bom's (2019) work, our study emphasized the dilemmatic dynamics of transitions in drinking styles which could play out in participants socializing options and ongoing decision-making around personal drinking choices during specific social occasions. Recognizing these dilemmas is important from a health psychology perspective as they suggest that, under particular conditions or circumstances, the pros and cons of more excessive drinking styles could be finely balanced.

Findings connect with contemporary but little researched movements such as 'sober curious' or 'mindful drinking' which refer to individuals who have questioned, changed, and/or learn to exert a greater degree of choice around personal drinking practices (Gray, 2017; Warrington, 2018). We consider our participants to be illustrative of individuals who might be considered typical members of 'sober curious' movements in that they had learnt to question alcohol's role and had grown able to exert greater agency around personal drinking practices. The term 'sober curious' provides a way of side-stepping unhelpful binary understandings of an individual's drinking choices but does not, definitionally, mean that routinely not drinking alcohol regularly *or* not getting drunk when alcohol is consumed. In this way, being 'sober curious' allows for a more nuanced and flexible way of understanding drinking styles, but also creates a potentially ambiguous view of excessive alcohol consumption from a health promotion perspective. These considerations are important in light of current study findings in that the residual attraction of alcohol use (and excessive alcohol use) was apparent in almost half our sample; though *all* participants self-identified as light drinkers, *some* participants reported alcohol consumption patterns (i.e., Kelly, Lauren, Ellie, Michael) which would

be considered excessive or higher risk in conventional health promotion terms. Understanding the process of 'maturing out' among individuals who self-identify (or could be meaningfully categorized) as 'sober curious' is an interesting empirical question to explore in future work. Current study findings suggested that maturing out and drinking transitions might occur in different phases, with varied research paradigms making discrete, phase-specific, focal objects/dynamics more clearly visible. For example, an account of 'maturing out' focused on drinking transitions in the longer term (e.g., mid-adolescence to early 30s) might help highlight how changing responsibilities and a shift in normative climate result in adjusted/declined consumption patterns. By contrast, an account of 'maturing out' designed to focus on drinking transitions occurring over a shorter time frame (e.g., the three years of a typical university degree programme), during the period of late adolescence through to an individual's early/mid-20s might help draw attention to the choices and dilemmas underpinning drinking transitions highlighted in this article. Recognizing the challenges but also capitalising on the opportunities involved in these shorter-term manifestations of maturing out may serve as an important component of promoting moderate drinking and protecting from alcohol-related harms during the time spent by some young adults as university students.

Limitations, research extensions, and study applications

Study limitations are acknowledged. First, transition experiences were limited to ten interviews conducted at one institution and may not translate broadly in straightforward ways. We note here that drinking norms should be expected to differ between social spaces and seasonal periods (e.g., during and post-Fresher's week) as well as between institutions. Second, our self-selected of self-defined non-/light drinkers may have been skewed towards students experiencing dilemmatic/troubling features of drinking transitions who wished to share their experiences. Third, as noted previously, sample consumption levels varied considerably. However, this divergence in drinking style was interesting, suggesting that self-identified drinking status and actual drinking practices may differ dramatically. Future investigation is warranted to unpick further evidence of this discrepancy using a larger sample and a stratified sampling approach to acquire a sample of young adult transitioned drinkers, representative at a general population level. Fourth, our relatively broad age range (18–27 years) makes it difficult to discuss findings as applicable to a discrete developmental period (e.g., 'late adolescence'). Relatedly, we note that our conclusions may be inherently skewed towards interview accounts provided by older, 'more mature' individuals in our sample (e.g., Michael, Shaun) who inevitably had a greater stock of experience to draw on when discussing their experiences of drinking transitions. Despite the sample's wide age breadth, accounts did tentatively hint at age-related differences – for example, drinking transitions seemed harder for first-year students (e.g., Ellie, Jack) than final year students (e.g., Shaun's 'been there and done that'). These differences may indicate 'maturing out' in its conventional sense (i.e., acquisition of new adult responsibilities such as full-time work) among these older participants, even if these responsibilities were not explicitly discussed in our interviews. Understanding whether/how 'maturing out' differs for different age groups was, however, not possible in the current small-scale study. Future research could investigate these differences adopting a triangulation design in which 'maturing out' experiences of older and younger young adult drinkers could be systematically compared. Greater recognition of potentially dilemmatic features of drinking transitions could be embedded within campus-based health education messages to help strengthen moderate drinking

plans and practices among students concerned about, or aspiring to reduce, personal consumption levels and students already undergoing drinking transitions. For example, a reflective diary intervention, designed to log the trajectory of drinking transition experiences, could enhance the feasibility and benefits of reducing alcohol intake as one mechanism for sustaining moderate alcohol consumption patterns.

Conclusion

Challenging deeply entrenched expectations of heavy drinking in university environments is difficult. However, contemporary drinking practices among younger adults appear to be typically more moderate and exhibit greater diversity than has historically been the case. Current study data suggested that attention to dilemmatic features of transition in drinking styles may help illuminate the complex choices faced by university students and may help shift understandings of student drinking practices as fluid/deliberated rather than static and monochrome. Novel campus-based health education interventions could help students acknowledge dilemmatic features of drinking transitions as one route to strengthening moderate drinking intentions in a reflective, sustainable way during university times and beyond this period of young adulthood.

Conflicts of interest

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contribution

Dominic Conroy (Data curation; Formal analysis; Methodology; Project administration; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing) Charlotte Morton (Conceptualization; Investigation; Project administration; Validation; Writing – review & editing) Christine Griffin (Conceptualization; Supervision; Validation; Writing – review & editing).

Data availability statement

Study participants did not provide consent for interview transcripts (the study data) to be made publicly available in any form (e.g., on an online repository). For this reason, our study data will not be made publically available.

References

- Anda, R. F., Whitfield, C. L., Felitti, V. J., Chapman, D., Edwards, V. J., Dube, S. R., & Williamson, D. F. (2002). Adverse childhood experiences, alcoholic parents, and later risk of alcoholism and depression. *Psychiatric Services*, 53, 1001–1009. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.53.8.1001>
- Banister, E., Conroy, D., & Piacentini, M. (2019). Non-drinkers and non-drinking: A review, a critique and pathways to policy. In D. Conroy & F. Measham (Eds.), *Young adult drinking styles* (pp. 213–232). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Billig, M., Condor, S., Edwards, D., Gane, M., Middleton, D., & Radley, A. (1988). *Ideological dilemmas: A social psychology of everyday thinking*. London, UK: Sage.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2020). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>
- Caluzzi, G., MacLean, S., & Pennay, A. (2020). Re-configured pleasures: How young people feel good through abstaining or moderating their drinking. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 77. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2020.102709>
- Caluzzi, G., & Pennay, A. (2019). Alcohol, young adults and the new millennium: Changing meanings in a changing social climate. In D. Conroy & F. Measham (Eds.), *Young adult drinking styles* (pp. 47–65). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Conroy, D., & de Visser, R. O. (2013). 'Man up!': Discursive constructions of non-drinkers among UK undergraduates. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 18, 1432–1444. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105312463586>
- Conroy, D., & de Visser, R. O. (2014). Being a non-drinking student: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Psychology & Health*, 29, 536–551. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08870446.2013.866673>
- Conroy, D., & de Visser, R. O. (2018). Benefits and drawbacks of social non-drinking identified by British university students. *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 37, S89–S97. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dar.12610>
- Davoren, M. P., Demant, J., Shiely, F., & Perry, I. J. (2016). Alcohol consumption among university students in Ireland and the United Kingdom from 2002 to 2014: A systematic review. *BMC Public Health*, 16(173), 744–761. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-016-2843-1>
- de Looze, M., Raaijmakers, Q., Bogt, T. T., Bendtsen, P., Farhat, T., Ferreira, M., . . . Pickett, W. (2015). Decreases in adolescent weekly alcohol use in Europe and North America: Evidence from 28 countries from 2002 to 2010. *European Journal of Public Health*, 25, 69–72. <https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckv031>
- de Visser, R. O., Wheeler, Z., Abraham, C., & Smith, J. A. (2013). 'Drinking is our modern way of bonding': Young people's beliefs about interventions to encourage moderate drinking. *Psychology & Health*, 53, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08870446.2013.828293>
- Fat, L. N., Shelton, N., & Cable, N. (2018). Investigating the growing trend of non-drinking among young people; analysis of repeated cross-sectional surveys in England 2005–2015. *BMC Public Health*, 18(1090), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-018-5995-3>
- Gell, L., Ally, A., Buykx, P., Meier, P., & Hope, A. (2015). *Alcohol's harm to others*. Available at: <http://www.ias.org.uk/uploads/pdf/IAS%20reports/rp18072015.pdf>
- Gray, C. (2017). *The unexpected joy of being sober: Discovering a happy, healthy, wealthy alcohol-free life*. London, UK: Hachette.
- Greene, M. J. (2014). On the inside looking in: Methodological insights and challenges in conducting qualitative insider research. *The Qualitative Report*, 19, 1–13.
- Griffin, C., Bengry-Howell, A., Hackley, C., Mistral, W., & Szmigin, I. (2009). Every time I do it I absolutely annihilate myself: Loss of (self-) consciousness and loss of memory in young people's drinking narratives. *Sociology*, 43, 457–476. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038509103201>
- Heather, N., Partington, S., Partington, E., Longstaff, F., Allsop, S., Jankowski, M., . . . St Clair Gibson, A. (2011). Alcohol use disorders and hazardous drinking among undergraduates at English universities. *Alcohol and Alcoholism*, 46, 270–277. <https://doi.org/10.1093/alcalc/agr024>
- Hebden, R., Lyons, A. C., Goodwin, I., & McCreanor, T. (2015). "When you add alcohol, it gets that much better": University students, alcohol consumption, and online drinking cultures. *Journal of Drug Issues*, 45, 214–226. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022042615575375>
- Herman-Kinney, N. J., & Kinney, D. A. (2013). Sober as deviant: The stigma of sobriety and how some college students stay dry on a wet campus. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 42(1), 64–103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241612458954>
- Herring, R., Bayley, M., & Hurcombe, R. (2014). "But no one told me it's okay to not drink": A qualitative study of young people who drink little or no alcohol. *Journal of Substance Use*, 19(1–2), 95–102. <https://doi.org/10.3109/14659891.2012.740138>

- Jacobs, L., Conroy, D., & Parke, A. (2018). Negative experiences of non-drinking college students in Great Britain: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 16, 737–750. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-017-9848-6>
- Järvinen, M., & Bom, L. H. (2019). 'Maturing out' as normative standard: Qualitative interviews with young adult drinkers. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 22, 678–693. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2018.1535171>
- Lee, M. R., & Sher, K. J. (2018). "Maturing out" of binge and problem drinking. *Alcohol Research: Current Reviews*, 39(1), 31–42.
- Lemoine, M., Gmel, G., Foster, S., Marmet, S., & Studer, J. (2020). Multiple trajectories of alcohol use and the development of alcohol use disorder: Do Swiss men mature-out of problematic alcohol use during emerging adulthood? *PLoS One*, 15(1), e0220232. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0220232>
- Martinic, M., & Measham, F. (2008). *Swimming with crocodiles: The culture of extreme drinking*. London, UK: Routledge.
- McCreanor, T., Barnes, H. M., Kaiwai, H., Borell, S., & Gregory, A. (2008). Creating intoxicogenic environments: Marketing alcohol to young people in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Social Science & Medicine*, 67, 938–946. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2008.05.027>
- Measham, F., & Brain, K. (2005). 'Binge' drinking, British alcohol policy and the new culture of intoxication. *Crime, Media, Culture*, 1, 262–283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659005057641>
- National Union of Students. (2018). *Students and Alcohol National Survey: Research into higher education students' relationship with alcohol 2017–18*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/students-alcohol-national-survey>
- Nicholls, E. (2020). Sober rebels or good consumer-citizens? Anti-consumption and the 'enterprising self' in early sobriety. *Sociology*.
- Office for National Statistics. (2017). *Adult drinking habits in Great Britain, 2005 to 2016*. Retrieved from <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/drugusealcoholandsmoking/bulletins/opinionsandlifestylesurveyadultdrinkinghabitsingreatbritain/2005to2016>
- Parker, H. (2003). Pathology or modernity? Rethinking risk factor analysis of young drug users. *Addiction Research and Theory*, 11, 141–144. <https://doi.org/10.1080/160663502100021692>
- Pennay, A., Livingston, M., & MacLean, S. (2015). Young people are drinking less: It is time to find out why. *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 34, 115–118. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dar.12255>
- Piacentini, M. G., & Banister, E. N. (2009). Managing anti-consumption in an excessive drinking culture. *Journal of Business Research*, 62, 279–288. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2008.01.035>
- Raninen, J., Leifman, H., & Ramstedt, M. (2013). Who is not drinking less in Sweden? An analysis of the decline for the period 2004–2011. *Alcohol and Alcoholism*, 48, 592–597. <https://doi.org/10.1093/alcalc/agt051>
- Terry, G., Hayfield, N., Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. In C. Willig & W. Stainton Rogers (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (pp. 17–37). London, UK: Sage.
- Warrington, R. (2018). *Sober curious*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Windle, M. (2020). Maturing out of alcohol use in young adulthood: Latent class growth trajectories and concurrent young adult correlates. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*, 44, 532–540. <https://doi.org/10.1111/acer.14268>
- World Health Organization. (2018). *Heavy episodic drinking among drinkers*. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/gho/alcohol/consumption_patterns/heavy_episodic_drinkers_text/en/
- Wybron, I. (2016). *Youth Drinking in Transition*. London, UK: Demos. Retrieved from <https://demomuk.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Youth-drinking-web.pdf>